



The New Yorker

By Frank Condon

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YOU may have read somewhere, among the veracious chronicles of the day, the story of the humble German cobbler who thought himself Emperor of Germany. Perhaps you came across the narrative of the British jackie whose delusion it was that he had become admiral of the fleet. And then there was the dispatch in the foreign-news columns concerning the French peasant in sabots who came to Paris believing that he had been elected mayor of that gay and wicked municipality.

Of course, these were stories of mental aberration, and when you come to think it over seriously, perhaps the story of Robert Cotton would interest the mental sharps who testify in such peculiar language at our rich murder trials. Perhaps Robert Cotton needed to have his head examined for soft spots. Let him who is perfectly sane stand up and cast the first writ of commitment.

In the little town of Vermillion, New York, six hours from the fever camps on Broadway by Mr. Vanderbilt's justly famous tramway, the most imposing institution, and the most respectable, is the Vermillion Trust Company, Henry H. Dodge, president. The trust company is to Vermillion what St. Peter's is to Rome and the Bank of England to London; and there, behind a shining brass-grille window, you would find Mr. Robert Cotton, figuring in a large book each day from nine to five.

Robert was one of the assistant cashiers. He was twenty-five, good looking, clean of habits, well dressed, bright-eyed, honest, industrious, and destined for a long and middling prosperous career with the trust company. Furthermore, he had a sweetheart, whom he intended to marry in a few months and enthrone in a little vine-clad cottage up on Woodward Avenue, near the Methodist church.

Everything was serene and placid with Robert Cotton. He had no debts; he never gambled; his strongest drink was water; his amusements were simple and quiet; and President Dodge regarded him with the warm favor of a father and a friend.

Into his peaceful existence came the demon of unrest on the multicolored wings of the metropolitan Sunday press. The New York papers reached Vermillion about nine in the morning. Robert Cotton bought them one and all. There are a great many men like Robert living in small towns, who worship the metropolis. Some of them know they will never press shoe leather upon Broadway or less famous highways. But all of them add to the evening prayer: "And let me see New York before I die."

With Robert Cotton the city became a disease. Its growth began in his childhood and continued to spread as he gathered years. He knew the streets of the big burg better than a veteran

policeman or the gas-meter man. He knew the traditions of New York from the day Peter Stuyvesant, or some one else, bought the rock from the savages for the price of a light dinner at the Waldorf. He remembered the famous murders and could name for you the principal actors in every notable crime as far back as 1886. There was nothing about New York City that Robert Cotton did not know—and he had never seen it.

But, while the daily papers brought him joy, it was in the Sunday supplements that he reveled. From the humble shadows of Vermillion he worshiped the fashion, wealth, and society that get into the newspapers as often as Tammany Hall. He knew the social leaders, followed their varied activities, quoted the figures of their fortunes to those who would hear him, envied their dinners, dances, and dress, and breathed sighs of distress whenever he thought of them.

Now and then he stood before his mirror and looked himself over, saying something like this :

"I am good looking, young, and ambitious. Why should I waste my life in this little tank town? I'm a yap, but why should I remain one? Why should I not be a New Yorker? Who knows, if I went to the city, but that I should make a great fortune, mingle with the leaders of the social world, flit about in my motor car, dance with the society buds, give receptions, ride to hounds on Long Island, and have my name printed prominently 'among those present'?"

Then Robert would think tenderly of Bessie Longlon, the little dressmaker's apprentice. What of her? Naturally he would marry her; but perhaps it would be better to wait until he had accomplished great things. Bessie would wait. Rarely was there such a love as Bessie's for Robert.

The disease increased in virulence. On a certain day Robert opened his

mind to little Bessie, and her eyes widened in shocked surprise.

"You know best, Robert," she said, when he had made a lengthy statement covering the situation. "I have the greatest confidence in you. You will accomplish whatever you set out to do, but—but it will be lonely for me."

"Soon after I reach New York I will send for you," he answered cheerfully. "You will share my triumphs. No matter how many beautiful ladies I meet, not one of them shall ever displace you in my heart. I shall never love any woman but you."

The next morning, Robert startled President Dodge, of the trust company, by remarking that he was about to resign. As far as the president could recall, no other employee had ever voluntarily severed his connection with the company; and when Robert explained that he was about to cut loose from Vermillion and become a New Yorker, Mr. Dodge indulged in the old-fashioned custom of giving advice.

But you cannot kill a germ by talking to it, and in Robert there were more than a million germs, all labeled "N. Y."

And so it happened that the day accommodation rolled into the palace of stone and cut glass adjoining Simeon Ford's hostelry on the Rue Forty-two, bringing the usual cigar and underwear salesmen and the ex-cashier of the Vermillion Trust Company. Robert stood on the corner, slightly dazed by the roaring of taxicab exhausts and the clanging of car gongs, but able to breathe ecstatically the same air being breathed by thirty or forty thousand hurrying New Yorkers about him. It was exactly what he had expected. He was slightly frightened, but it was a pleasant sensation. From the magnificent hotel opposite, a beautiful woman descended with languorous steps and entered a motor car. She was clad in yellow silk, and from her hair extended

a wondrous bird-of-paradise feather. A man with a silk hat and white gloves aided her into the machine.

In Vermillion, one might have stood on the corner many years without once seeing such a queenly woman, and the only silk hat back home was the one President Dodge wore to the lodge funerals.

"A leader of society," Robert murmured. "It's great even to be this close to things."

Then he picked up his two suit cases and made his way slowly to a street and a number that he had written down before he left home.

In the crowded car that took him westward across the city to where the rippling Hudson murmurs, there was an astute pickpocket who remarked to himself, upon the entrance of Robert, that here was opportunity. The pickpocket got Mr. Cotton's wallet without the slightest trouble, and stepped off the car unobserved. When Robert arrived at the boarding-house address, he discovered what had happened on the car, searched his pockets and found a few dollars the crook had overlooked, and then departed to another boarding house where the cost per week was less.

It would be a somewhat tedious task to follow Robert's activities for the next little while, because they consisted of nothing more exciting than looking for work and being refused it. His little supply of money ran out, and so did part of his nerve; but whenever he felt most despondent, he thought of Vermillion, the trust company, little Bessie Longlon, and the smiles of scorn that would greet him if he returned in tatters and humility.

And then, when everything looked black, Robert secured employment. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he got a job, because a job means anything under eleven dollars a week. It was with the Queens Borough Gas & Coke Company, with head-

quarters in Long Island City, which is a place where wicked New Yorkers do penance for their sins—after they are dead.

Through a long course in the school of Sunday supplements, the ex-Vermillionaire knew that Forty-second Street is the social, sporting, and general center of the universe. He would live on no other street, but his finances forced him to the westward beyond Tenth Avenue; and from a little dark, unhappy room near the roof of a third-rate boarding house he traveled daily to the job in Long Island City, which is almost a day's work in itself.

He arose at six o'clock, ate his breakfast, and hurried away. He toiled steadily until six in the evening, and then came wearily home, had his dinner, and, being fatigued, turned into his bed and remained there until six in the morning. There was no variation. There was not even Sunday, because the Gas & Coke Company was moving its plant and its employees were working overtime.

And there, on the edge of the battered washstand in the Forty-second Street room, Robert wrote letters home to little Bessie Longlon in Vermillion. They were letters. In them was no word concerning the Queens Borough Gas & Coke Company, and nothing referring to a room of bathtub size on the fourth floor of a mildewed and scraggly tenement. Before Bessie's eyes there appeared no complaint of the dreary street-car rides in the sad dusk of early morning, or of battles to board the leaky ferries on East River. Robert said nothing of his diminished fortune, his deadening labors, the fearful monotony of his daily existence, or the unappetizing corned beef and cabbage that faced him so often in the cellarlike dining room of the boarding house.

He was a New Yorker. To him, that meant the same thing as being king

means to George the Fifth of England. In spite of the grind that composed his life, Robert was frightfully happy. He lived, not in the actualities of his life, but in its potentialities. At any moment it was possible for some marvelous change to come. Something might happen to lift him in a flash into the ranks of those who peopled the Sunday society columns, because he was a New Yorker, and to a New Yorker all things are possible.

There are six or seven million human beings in New York. Some of them are New Yorkers, and some think they are. In the midst of the rattle, bang, and clatter of the metropolis, they plod their way along the day's routine, seeing New Yorkers, riding in the same street cars, looking into the same shop windows, sniffing the same charged atmosphere—and yet they are not of the city. These are the deluded ones who have no more to do with the metropolis than has the straw-chewing resident of Broken Bend, Wisconsin. It is as if the city were a great rich banquet in a luxurious restaurant, with string orchestras playing behind banked flowers and beautiful women passing between the tables; and those thousands—perhaps millions—are the envious ones who stand outside in the chill air, their noses pressed to the plate-glass windows of the banquet room, hope in their hearts and the excitement of semiparticipation in their veins. If you do not understand precisely what I mean by this halting explanation, you will have to write me a letter.

Robert Cotton was outside the banquet hall, with his nose against the pane. But he wrote to Bessie:

This city is the most marvelous place in the whole world. Everything is here that any one could want. There are so many things to be done that I find each day is many hours too short. I am making plenty of money, through my acquaintance with influential friends in Wall Street, but the money is only of partial importance. My list

of acquaintances is growing amazingly. In the afternoon, I generally wander around to one of the tea rooms, and spend a couple of hours tangoing and trotting with some extraordinarily pretty women.

There is some social affair to occupy every evening. In fact, I am often puzzled to select which place to go. The Café de Madrid is very gay from ten in the evening until closing time, and there you may see the cream of the city's society. Mrs. Spillane sat opposite me Tuesday night, and she is as gracious as she is wealthy.

Saturday I began to learn how to play polo. It is very exciting. A crowd of us is going to the Van Horlick's country home for the week-end, and we will be very jolly, because I know all who are invited. Bridge is fascinating, and I play very well, considering my lack of experience. My evening clothes were well enough in Vermillion, but I have had to secure an entire new outfit. New York is so different. One of the Ferris boys is begging me to run down to Palm Beach on his yacht, but there are so many charming people here in town that I cannot bear to leave, even for a brief time.'

This is an extract from one of Robert's communications. There were shoals of such letters. In them the writer named and renamed the great persons with whom he was acquainted—through the society columns. He described his comings and goings in the bypaths of luxury and fashion. And while we, who are cold-blooded and critical, would call Robert a liar, it is more accurate to say that he was simply suffering from Hypnosis Metropolis.

Bessie read his missives with ever-increasing awe. In her heart was the dumb fear that this meteor man, whose friends were the great and rich, would forget her. How could he longer care for a country lassie, whose ways were simple and whose clothes must be something for the city to look upon with a smile? In the corridors of the mammoth hotels, what would Robert think if he were suddenly to meet her? How would Robert look? Bessie bought the Sunday New York papers, expecting to find photographs of her sweetheart

or articles telling of his doings. In the Vermillion weekly, she scanned eagerly the news items that came under a New York date line. It seemed impossible for the press to overlook such a man as Robert must be, but Bessie knew that newspapers are unreliable and full of error.

If the mythical adventurer had suddenly found himself transported into the heaven of his dreams, and if money had flowed into his pockets as freely as he wrote, Robert would have sent for Bessie and would have married her forthwith. For this we must give him credit. He desired no alliance with a daughter of fashion and opulence. In the back of his head was always the knowledge that there was but one girl for him and that she was in humble Vermillion, waiting.

How long would she have to wait? The Gas & Coke Company manifested no intention of taking Robert into the board of directors, and his weekly stipend barely sufficed for his modest needs. He lived on, a New Yorker in his heart, but in reality a hopeless outsider, with nothing in the world to connect him with the city except his address on Forty-second Street.

Mrs. Spillane was his idol. She topped the list of those social beings he had learned to worship. He knew that her beautiful home was somewhere up Fifth Avenue, and he meant to see it as soon as he could steal a half hour from the Gas & Coke Company. He knew Mrs. Spillane's friends, the number of motor cars in her garage, her various country homes, and other intimate details of her life. The society editors recognized her as a leader, and so did Robert.

On a Sunday afternoon, when the sun was shining, young Mr. Cotton had his first holiday, for the gas company announced a day off for its long-suffering employees. Robert brushed his clothes, put on his best tie, and sallied

forth, turning quite naturally toward Fifth Avenue. His pulses were beating with excitement and his eyes were shining.

At Thirty-seventh Street he started to cross the avenue, and in the middle of the asphalt something struck him, tossing him into the air. For a brief instant a terrible pain assailed him, and then all was peace. When he opened his eyes again, a tall young man in livery, aided by a policeman, was lifting him into a motor car, and a great crowd was standing around the machine in a morbid circle.

Robert felt numb, but he could see faintly through his half-closed eyes, and he heard a girlish voice saying:

"He may be terribly injured, mother. We can't permit him to be taken to a hospital until we know how badly he is hurt, and the quickest way to help him is to take him home and send for Doctor Rutledge. Hurry, William! Straight home!"

Dimly Robert was aware of a very pleasant note in the voice. He could not see the woman called "mother." Presently the machine started, and again Robert's consciousness left him.

When next he opened his eyes, strange sights greeted him, and his body seemed to be clasped in a vise. He lay upon the most marvelous bed he had ever seen, in a great room, all in blue, into which the morning sun was streaming. His bed was surmounted by a silken canopy, such as he had seen in books on the Orient, and it rose high above the sea of rugs that surrounded it. His fingers had never felt such soft bedclothes, and as he gazed upon his body, he saw that it was covered with a suit of pajamas that seemed to be made of butterflies' wings or something similarly diaphanous.

About the bed stood a number of people, including the young girl Robert had seen briefly in the automobile. Two of

them were surgeons. A white-capped nurse bent over him.

"Where am I?" Robert inquired.

"You are in my home," a lady answered, coming into the sick man's vision. "I am Mrs. Spillane, and my motor struck you."

"Am I badly hurt?" Robert asked.

"The surgeons cannot tell. They will know in a few hours. You mustn't talk."

Mrs. Spillane! He was in her home! What mattered the binding of linen about his body? A few broken ribs—a displaced liver—pouf! A sudden sense of deep contentment came over him, and he closed his eyes, while those around the bed conversed in low tones.

Robert awakened a few hours later with part of the feeling of numbness gone. There was no one in the room except the nurse and the young girl, who regarded him with anxious eyes. She seemed to be about nineteen, and she was exceedingly pretty. When she saw that the patient was awake, she came over to him.

"We are all very sorry, Mr. Cotton," she said, in her soft voice. "It was an unfortunate accident, but you will get better rapidly. I'm Alice Spillane. I don't know whether you remember seeing me in the car."

"I saw you," he said slowly. "Thank you for taking care of me. I presume it was my fault in crossing the street where I did."

"We've done everything possible for you," the girl continued. "Two of the best surgeons in New York have had charge of you. They say you were badly shocked, but they hope there is no internal injury. We were frightened at first. I thought you might die, and so I took the liberty of—of sending for one of your friends."

Robert glanced at her in surprise.

"One of my friends?" he repeated.

"I looked through your clothes—they were badly torn by the fender of

the car—and found a letter addressed to Miss Bessie Longlon, and—and also several letters from Miss Longlon to you: I hope you will pardon me for reading them, but it was necessary. We have telegraphed Miss Longlon about your accident, and she has replied that she is coming here at once."

Mr. Cotton attempted to rise on an elbow, but found himself too weak.

"Bessie," he murmured. "Of course—you did the right thing, Miss Spillane, but I am not as badly hurt as to need her, am I?"

"No, but we couldn't tell at first. She'll be here this afternoon. She is your—"

"Miss Longlon is my fiancée," Robert answered, with a wan smile. "I'm very glad she is coming."

For the next few hours the patient devoted himself to deep reflection. He thought of the Queens Borough Gas & Coke Company and grinned. He also gave a few minor thoughts to the chipped iron bed over on West Forty-second Street, the torn and bleary rug, the splintered boards, and the broken water pitcher.

He had come, after devious ways, into the home of luxury, and not into a second-class home, but into the palatial residence of Mrs. James Spillane and her beautiful daughter. In his wildest moments of ambition he could have dreamed of nothing higher than this. True, it had taken the blunt end of a motor car to shunt him into the inner circle, but what of that? All about him were the people of his imaginings, the wealth of his hopes, and the air of breeding he had longed for and written about so convincingly.

Bessie was coming to see him because he was hurt. She would find him among these people he had described to her. He shuddered when he thought of another coming that might have been—when she would have been forced to climb rickety stairs in a dim tene-

ment on the West Side; when she would have found him, pale and bandaged, on the narrow bed with the torn and soiled coverlet.

Later in the afternoon, Alice Spillane again inquired after the patient. Robert was improved.

"I want you to feel, Mr. Cotton," said the little daughter of the rich, "that we are your friends and that we want to do everything possible for your comfort. Mother and I have been more upset by this accident than you think. If the car had struck you one instant before it did, you would certainly have been killed. So we're deeply grateful that it was no worse than it is. We will do all in our power to make you and Miss Longlon comfortable during your stay. The servants are preparing her room now, and if she or you is in need of anything overlooked, I hope you will mention it."

"You're very good—too good," Robert answered. "I don't in the least blame you for the accident, and I am deeply appreciative of your kindness to me and to Miss Longlon."

Bessie arrived in the afternoon. She was dressed simply, and the most blasé New Yorker would not have smiled at her, but would have looked with admiration. Mrs. Spillane and her daughter received the visitor with open arms, and took her to a room such as does not exist in Vermillion and in many other places.

Then Bessie went to Robert's bedside, and what they said to each other is hardly your business or mine.

For three days Robert recuperated, surprising the surgeons by his rapid improvement. Bessie sat by him, patting his hand at intervals. Now and then, while he slept, she went away with Alice Spillane in the big limousine and saw the wonders of New York. She beheld the pleasant and interesting things in high places, such as are unfamiliar to the humble millions; and in

those three wondrous days Bessie Longlon recognized many things from the descriptions in Robert's letters.

It was fascinating to her, and Robert was fortunate, but had the little lady known, she accomplished in three days what her sweetheart had never accomplished—and never would accomplish.

Robert eventually stood upon his feet and reached forth rather uncertainly for his clothes. One of the Spillane servants aided him, and, to his surprise, he found in readiness fresh linen that was not his own and a suit of clothes from a Fifth Avenue tailor worth three months' rent in Vermillion.

"Your other garments were injured in the accident," the servant explained. "Mrs. Spillane had these made during your stay here."

Bessie, her hand in Robert's arm so that she might steady him, walked him back and forth in the blue room.

"Where," she asked, "are we going?"

"We are going, dear girl, back to Vermillion," Robert answered, smiling weakly. "We're going to be married as soon as possible, and I am going to give up New York and get back my old place with President Dodge."

"Robert!" she said, with a gasp of astonishment. "Surely you couldn't stand Vermillion after—after all this." She swept the room with her arm. "Your rich friends here, your amusements, your achievements and triumphs in the city—you can't give them up for Vermillion!"

"Not for Vermillion, but for a little girl named Bessie Longlon," he answered. "What is wealth? What is success? What are all these compared with the loyal love of a girl like you? I give them up gladly. Come along; the car is waiting, and we go from here direct to the Grand Central Station."

That night the day accommodation rolled into the shiny brick station in Vermillion, and two extremely contented young people descended. They

were married within a week. That was some time ago, fellow citizens; but to this day you will hear—if you visit Vermillion and come to know the Cottons—you will hear from the pretty lips of Mrs. Cotton that she has the finest husband in the whole world. She will tell you of her famous trip to New York and of her husband's society friends; and all these, the little lady will boast, he nobly gave up for her and for the simple life of a small town.

Robert has sometimes worn a puzzled look. There is in a drawer of his desk a bundle of his wife's letters, written to him during his metropolitan career. One of them is strangely missing, and Robert has always believed that it must have been lost from his pocket when the Spillane motor struck him. That is a mistake. The particular letter is now in ashes, and it was burned, after much worried thought, by Alice Spillane. She cremated it because she thought it best—thought that it might save trouble at some future time, and perhaps Miss Spillane was right. Robert would scarcely miss one letter from so many. Before she burned Bessie's letter, Alice read it several times. In the first place, it had been necessary for her to read it to discover some one of Robert's friends after he had been hurt. It was quite a long missive, and only

part of it shall be shown. Bessie had written her sweetheart:

I am glad that you are doing so splendidly in that great city, and that you have such wonderful friends. Since you went away, I have read the New York papers with care, and now I am coming to know something of the society people. It makes me feel very small indeed when you write me of your friendship with such famous families as the Gordons and Blakes and Winchesters. Only last Sunday there was a large photograph of Miss Alice Spillane in the picture section of the *Chronicle*, and a little article telling of her fondness for automobiling. And then to think of your having tea with her the very afternoon I was reading about her with envy!

I don't doubt that she laughed at your jokes, as you say. I always do. You must be very amusing, even to these fine young ladies. But surely you can imagine how little and unimportant I feel. How can you give me another thought? Sometimes I grow quite despondent about everything, and then I almost hate Vermillion. And sometimes I wish you had never gone to New York, for then you would have known only ordinary, commonplace poor people.

As has been stated, the heiress of the Spillane millions burned this letter, but even as it turned to white ashes on the fireplace there was a look of friendly sympathy in the young eyes that watched its destruction. Some people, even very wealthy ones, have a knack of understanding things quickly.

